

Field Report

Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore

■ **1.0 Summary**

Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore (NL), located on the eastern shore of Lake Michigan in the northwestern portion of Michigan's Lower Peninsula is strong candidate for alternative modes of transportation. The 35-mile-long park, which also includes North and South Manitou Islands, is located 25 miles west of Traverse City. The Manitou Islands are reached via ferry from the town of Leeland, which is outside the Lakeshore. Sleeping Bear Dunes NL was established in 1970 by an act of Congress and formed from lands purchased from private owners and from lands and water areas donated by the state of Michigan. The Lakeshore mission is to preserve outstanding natural features including forests, beaches, dunes and ancient glacial phenomena along 100 kilometers (64 miles) of Lake Michigan shoreline, in order to perpetuate the natural setting for the benefit and enjoyment of the public, and to protect it from developments and inappropriate uses that would destroy its scenic beauty, scientific and recreational value.

Although a bus transit service within the park does not appear warranted in the short term, improved ferry service to North and South Manitou Islands is needed. The improvements include an upgrade or replacement of existing boats, upgraded terminal facilities, and perhaps more frequent service to one or both islands. While the current ferry passenger parking arrangement in Leeland is workable, a more permanent solution may be needed if vessel capacity is expanded.

■ **2.0 Background Information**

2.1 Location

Sleeping Bear Dunes NL is located on the eastern shore of Lake Michigan in the northwestern portion of Michigan's Lower Peninsula. The 35-mile-long park, which also includes North and South Manitou Islands, is located 25 miles west of Traverse City. The park contains approximately 71,000 acres, of which 14,000 are non-federal. The park features contains substantial resources, including beaches, hiking trails, camping, impressive dune formations, lakes, and forests. The Lakeshore also contains historic rural farmland and farm-related buildings, lifesaving stations, and a lighthouse. See Figure 1 for location and basic physical configuration, and Figure 2 for a picture of the Lakeshore Dunes.

Figure 1. Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore Map



Figure 2. View of Lakeshore Dunes



2.2 Administration and Classification

Sleeping Bear Dunes is a National Lakeshore Park. The superintendent is Ivan Miller.

2.3 Physical Description

Sleeping Bear Dunes NL, a fee area, is organized around six distinct areas: 1) Platte; 2) Empire; 3) Glen Lake; 4) Good Harbor; 5) North Manitou Island; and 6) South Manitou Island. There are nine Lake Michigan beach areas managed by the NPS as well as a beach area on Little Glen Lake. The park also contains the Pierce Stocking Scenic Drive, which has several overlooks and related facilities. The key characteristics related to transportation are:

- The main park roadway is Michigan Route 22, which is variously referred to as Leelanau Highway, Harbor Highway, and Manitou Trail. Access to many of the park's attractions is off this road. U.S. 31, which provides regional links to the park, connects Michigan's Upper Peninsula with the southern part of the state. Since the park is located 25 miles from Traverse City, regional roadway access is limited to two-lane highways. During peak times (July and August), volumes on these roads can lead to some travel delays.

- Local transit services are provided by the Bay Area Transit Authority (BATA), based in Traverse City. The service is fairly limited with six trips per day per direction between the park headquarters in Empire and Traverse City. This is a subscription service, meaning that one must reserve a ride. In addition, depending upon where passengers board or alight the bus, the route of the bus can vary. The fare is \$2.00 per trip.
- Recreational hiking and cross country skiing facilities are provided throughout the park with more than 13 trails, exclusive of the Manitou Islands. In addition, there is a designated dune-climb area. Finally, at the Lake Michigan Overlook on the Pierce Stocking Scenic Drive, one can view the entire area from 450 feet above the Lake. Many visitors descend the Lake Michigan bluff at this overlook, and face a strenuous uphill return climb. Horses are permitted on the Alligator Hill Trail only.
- Camping is a popular activity, with two park campgrounds on the mainland, and camping on the Manitou Islands, which are served by Manitou Island Transit. South Manitou Island has designated campsites, while North Manitou Island is for backcountry camping.
- Bicycling is permitted on paved trails throughout the park, including the Scenic Drive, although no shared-use bicycle paths are provided.
- Water-related uses are very popular. Fishing, kayaking, canoeing, and tubing opportunities are available in the communities around the park and within some park facilities. The Platte River area is a very popular resource for these activities as is the Crystal River.
- Manitou Island Transit, a private concessionaire located in Leland, offers trips to North Manitou Island daily except Tuesday and Thursday between June 15th and Labor Day. The boat makes a single round trip each day leaving Leland at 10:00 a.m. and leaves the island after a 15-minute layover. The passengers on this boat must stay overnight and are thus required to obtain a backcountry camping permit. A park employee is stationed at the Manitou Island Transit ticket office to sell park admission tickets, backcountry camping permits, and orient visitors. Trips to South Manitou Island are offered daily during June, July, and August, also leaving at 10:00 a.m. but with a five-hour layover on the island. Visitors can explore the island on foot or take motorized tours in modified pickup trucks (see Figure 3).

2.4 Mission and Goals of the National Lakeshore

Sleeping Bear Dunes NL was established in 1970 by an act of Congress and formed from lands purchased from private owners and from lands and water areas donated by the state of Michigan. The Lakeshore mission is to preserve outstanding natural features including forests, beaches, dunes and ancient glacial phenomena along 100 kilometers (64 miles) of Lake Michigan shoreline, in order to perpetuate the natural setting for the benefit and enjoyment of the public, and to protect it from developments and inappropriate uses that would destroy its scenic beauty, scientific and recreational value.

Figure 3. Manitou Island Transit Shuttle and Island Tour Vehicle

2.5 Visitation Levels and Visitor Profile

Sleeping Bear Dunes NL accommodates approximately 1.3 million visitors per year, about 60 percent of whom visit in July and August. This number is consistent with past years, when attendance ranged between 1.1 and 1.3 million, with a ten-year average of 1.2 million visitors. Between 4,000 and 8,000 of these visitors visit the Manitou Islands. Although not necessarily representative of all visitors, a license plate survey conducted in 1996 showed that most of the visitors' cars are from Michigan (64 percent), with 22 percent from Ohio, Illinois, and Indiana. The remainder of license plates were from 20 other states and Canada. If a visitor travels to Traverse City by airplane and then rents a car, the representation of Michigan can be skewed.

■ 3.0 Existing Conditions, Issues and Concerns

The Sleeping Bear Dunes NL has seen the development of a variety of attractive park facilities, including beaches, parking areas, the Visitor Center/Headquarters building, trail heads, and docking facilities. Because the park was created from both state-owned land and private lands, there are numerous properties and structures that fall under the jurisdiction of the NPS but whose maintenance/restoration has yet to be adequately funded.

Lake Michigan is very active, especially in the winter months, moving sand throughout the lakeshore. Sand movement blocks access between the Platte River and the Lake. This movement also impacts the docks on the Manitou Islands. These areas must be dredged at considerable expense to the NPS to maintain boat access to these areas.

There are also concerns about the impacts of certain concession activities, primarily associated with kayaking, tubing, and canoeing. Parking associated with these activities, boat storage, and related activities often occur outside of the designated limits established by agreement with the concessionaires.

3.1 Transportation Conditions, Issues and Concerns

The transportation issues and concerns can be summarized as follows:

- The need for an automobile to travel to and throughout the park;
- Occasional parking demand in excess of supply, especially in the Platte River area during fishing season; and
- Transportation to and from North and South Manitou Islands.

Automobile Dependence

With limited public transportation in the area, travel by automobile is the only available option to see the park. Further, given the linear nature of the park, the operation of a shuttle system through the park is not likely to generate much ridership. Some park-and-ride shuttle operations might help to accommodate excess parking demand in the areas where they exist, but only on a limited number of days per year.

Parking

Because of the size of Sleeping Bear Dunes NL and its wide range of facilities, parking resources are generally sufficient to accommodate demand during the peak months. On occasion, the parking lots along the Pierce Stocking Scenic Drive are full and motorists traveling along the drive are forced to either wait for a space to turn over or travel to the next parking area along the drive. Parking duration in these lots is generally short, and access to the drive is occasionally limited to control overuse. This control takes place at the contact station, where fees are collected.

Another parking issue occurs at the parking area adjacent to Platte River Point. This area features a town-controlled park and 42-space parking lot as well as two NPS parking areas (89 spaces). Generally these lots are well used but adequate to meet demand. In the fall, however, the demand for parking by area fishermen exceeds the supply available. To address this, there is a current proposal to construct a 100-space parking lot on currently undeveloped land. This proposal was developed by an independent organization, and has not been endorsed by park officials who have concerns about resource impacts in the area.

Manitou Island Access

The existing boats serving the islands are quite old. While they function sufficiently to provide access to the islands, park personnel *and* the concessionaire both have expressed interest in replacing the boats in the future. The current system is often oversubscribed, which limits the number of people who can visit the islands. The docking facilities are also in need of expansion/upgrade. In addition to the boats and docks, it would be desirable to replace the fleet of vehicles used to provide tours on the island with more modern vehicles that provide protection from the elements.

There are several potential reasons to upgrade the fleet. First, more reliable and faster boats could be used to improve the quality of service. For South Manitou Island, improved boat services could increase frequency, increase visitation, and provide a better quality of service. For North Manitou Island, a boat that provides more protection from the elements would be desirable (see Figure 4). Second, it might be possible to increase frequency of service to this island, not to increase usage but to provide better serve its users, who now only have one trip on and one trip off the island five days per week. It is important to note that the management of the North Manitou Island resource as a back-country camping area is an important element of the overall resource management plan of the park.

Figure 4. North and South Manitou Island Boats and Loading Operation



3.2 Community Development Conditions, Issues and Concerns

The park seems to operate in a positive and symbiotic relationship with adjacent communities. Many of the businesses in the area support retail activity related to tourism and farming still occurs in the area around Traverse City. Within the park, concerns remain about the recurring dredging of the mouth of the Platte River. According to the Statement for Management, “There are a wide variety of state, county, and local agencies that are interested in the management and eventual development of the Lakeshore. ... Interest remains high in Benzie County in the state use of the proposed 7.6-mile Crystal Ridge Scenic Drive.”

3.3 Natural or Cultural Resource Conditions, Issues and Concerns

The area of most concern with respect to cultural resources is the future of the 322 historical structures, cultural and archaeological sites. According to the Statement for Management, “present levels of funding do not meet present needs, some of which are mandated programs, except on a very minimal reactive basis. A more thorough approach is required if the prevention of permanent damage and loss of the Lakeshore’s historic resources is to be accomplished.”

3.4 Recreation Conditions, Issues and Concerns

Several recreation-related issues were described in the previous section on Transportation Conditions. In addition, bicycle lanes are planned for Route 22, which will facilitate bicycling between different parts of the park.

■ 4.0 Planning and Coordination

4.1 Unit Plans

Sleeping Bear Dunes NL is just initiating the revision of its General Management Plan (GMP), which was last completed in 1979. This process is expected to be completed within a three-year period. In addition to the GMP, the park is also in the midst of preparing an Historic Properties Management Plan, primarily to address the historic structures that are located primarily in the Port Oneida area.

4.2 Public and Agency Coordination

The NL park is located in two Michigan Counties, Leelanau and Benzie. Coordination with county agencies, as well as the communities that make up and surround the park, is recognized as important and necessary by park staff. Park personnel participation in local and regional planning activities, and seek public and agency input on its planning process.

The Friends of Sleeping Bear Dunes NL is an important organization providing support to the park. The organization has provided between 16,000 and 22,000 hours of volunteer time and has raised \$150,000 to support the park.

■ 5.0 Assessment of Need and System Options

5.1 Magnitude of Need

The need for specific Alternative Transportation Systems (ATS) is significant at Sleeping Bear Dunes NL. In order for the Manitou Islands to be fully appreciated, reliable, and perhaps used by more people, more frequent boat service is needed to both islands while continuing to limit overall access to North Manitou Island. Docking facilities, on-shore transit vehicles, and appropriate support facilities will be needed in the near-term future.

5.2 Range of Feasible Transit Alternatives

The North and South Manitou Islands are outstanding resources. Their use is limited by access, and at times, demand exceeds capacity. To address this, newer and faster boats are needed. There are different ways to address this issue. One is through the concessionaire, who could update or expand their fleet. The other is for the NPS to purchase the boats. Either alternative will require significant expenditures. Further, changes will be needed to the existing docking facilities, perhaps even relocating the docks on North Manitou Island to a location that would require less dredging to accommodate large vessels.

Elsewhere in the park, the implementation of transit services does not appear warranted at this time. The size of the park, the relatively dispersed location of public facilities, and the fact that most of the visitors arrive by vehicle, indicate that requirements for a useful transit system do not exist. With several activity centers, it would be difficult to design a route to provide short headways. One potential transit option in the future (10-20 years) would be to offer a shuttle bus alternative for travelers along the Pierce Stocking Scenic Drive. Were that area to become overcrowded, the existing lower parking lot could be used to park overflow cars and the visitors could then be bused along the drive. To make this work effectively, bus turnout areas would be needed, possibly with shelters, and at least two buses would have to be in operation. A related option is to locate variable message signs on Route 22 at the turnoff for Pierce Stocking to inform motorists that the Drive is closed to further traffic.

■ 6.0 Bibliography

National Park Service, *Statement for Management Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore*, April 1993.

National Park Service Denver Service Center, *Assessment of Alternatives, General Management Plan, Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore*, August 1979.

National Park Service, Denver Service Center, *General Management Plan, Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore*, October 1979.

University of Idaho Visitor Services Project, *1998 Visitor Survey Card Data Report Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore*, March 1998.

■ 7.0 Persons Interviewed

Ivan Miller, Superintendent, Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore

Daniel Kreiber, Facility Manager, Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore

Duane Pearson, Deputy Superintendent, Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore

Beth Groversor, Owner, Manitou Island Transit